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AUTHOR Ammer, Jerome J.; Littleton, Barbara Rhein
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ABSTRACT

Questionnaires were completed by 217 parents of handicapped children to determine their present level of involvement and their desired participation in the education process. The sample (a rural population in central West Virginia, a suburban population in affluent school districts on Long Island, New York, and a city population from a mixed set of city boroughs) was chosen to represent rural, suburban, and urban populations among districts with established advocacy channels beyond the guidelines of P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Among demographic findings were that behavior disorders represented 34 percent and learning disabilities 24 percent of the returns; that parents of resource room students represented 42 percent and self contained classroom students 38 percent of the sample; that of the 74 percent of parents who reported their child's needs were being met, rural parents expressed the greatest satisfaction with services; that there was unexpectedly low agreement between parents and districts on the category describing the students' handicap; that 87 percent of parents were not presently involved in the local school; and that 32 percent felt no one provided them with assistance and/or advocacy. Among parent preferences for ways to improve communication with the school were regular letters and school conferences, with home visits ranking lowest. Parents expressed greatest interest in becoming involved in their child's progress reviews. Two general conclusions were drawn: that parents appear to be pleased with their children's services, and that it appears to be a question of personal preference rather than group characteristics which dictates parent needs and attitudes regarding advocacy. (CL)

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PARENT ADVOCACY: NOW MORE THAN EVER
ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL DECISIONS

JEROME J. AMMER, PH.D.
C.W. POST CENTER/LONG ISLAND UNIVERSITY

and

BARBARA RHEIN LITTLETON, M.A.
ALDERSON-BROADDUS COLLEGE

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Budget cuts in a time of fiscal restraint always hits hardest in the area of human services. Public Law 94-142, The Education of all the Handicapped Children Act, may still mandate services, but the quality and long term effectiveness of these services depends upon parent participation in their child's educational welfare. Long before and after formal education ceases for a student, parent and child still have to cope with the world outside the school house. The U.S. Office of Education established 1982-83 as a year when parent advocacy was to be a high priority. Government officials have come to realize that with or without federal funding, special services in the nation's public schools will not be effective if parents are not active participants in the educational planning for their children. In a back to basics spirit, the child's parents and teacher(s) must team up to ensure that the student reaches his/her maximum potential. Beyond the school yard, every parent dreams of the day his/her child will beome a successful, self-sufficient adult citizen in the community. The best way to ensure that dream is to actively involve parents in their child's education and social development.

DESIGN AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE SURVEY:

In order to ascertain the present level of involvement and desired participaiton of parents of special needs students in the education process, a combination Likert-scale/open ended questionnnaire was designed. After designing a questionnaire based on similar instruments developed by other researchers (Bell-Nathaniel, 1979; Ciddor & Finniecome, 1981; Davis & Heyl, 1980, Lynch & Stein, 1982; Yurchak & Mathews, 1980), the form was sent to professionals across the country who were involved in advocacy for their critique and suggestions. A Likert-scale was chosen because it was believed some parents may be unaware of the choices available to them. Another factor was that the reading levels and writing skills of parents would vary; therefore, an attempt was made to make responding as easy as possible. To allow for additional concerns and/or attitudes of individual parents, a set of open ended questions were also included.

Two states from the eastern section of the United States were selected as sites for discribution of the questionnaires. The locals selected for the survey were chosen because they exemplified commonly perceived 'stereotypical' perceptions of an urban, rural and suburban community. Hopefully, by surveying the extremes of each type of community, patterns of attitudes and needs might be more obviously noticeable.

The rural population was chosen from a county in central West Virginia. Like many predominantely rural counties, it has had to operate with limited financial resources. In spite of sparce monetary support, this district has continued to go that 'extra mile' in its efforts to provide quality education within a variety of delivery models for children with special needs.

The suburban population was chosen from affluent school districts on Long Island, New York. The communities were upward mobile settings in which a significant percentage of the working force commuted to New York City. The school tax base for the suburban communities was significantly above the national average. The majority of students were planning to go to college or go directly into family owned businesses.

The city population was chosen from a mixed set of city boroughs which reflected a mix of ethnic, social and economic backgrounds. While many of the city students were likely to seek unskilled labor upon finishing school, some would never finish school and others would go on to college.

Working through school district offices, 1600 forms were distributed on a stratified random bases. The forms were given to special needs students by their special education teachers to be completed by the students' parents. Once the forms were returned to the special educators, they were collected by the district office and forwarded to the

researchers. The protection of parent privacy was of utmost importance in this project. To ensure this privacy, parents were not asked to give their names. The distribution and collection of the questionnaires by school personnel was also employed to guarantee parent privacy. Of course, the researchers realized that all the middlemen built in as parent protections would also take control of distribution out of the hands of the researchers. The greater the number of middlemen, the greater the possibility of lower rates of return.

The intent of the survey was to learn more about parent perceptions of the concept of parent advocacy and to become aware of what parents identified as their pressing concerns. Secondly, the survey was used to analyze parent attitudes towards service providers as possible resources for assistance and information. In order to do this, a comparison was made between who parents believed were presently providing them with assistance and who parents believed ought to be providing them with assistance. The purpose of the survey was not to pit parent against service provider. Rather, it was to serve as an information source to bridge the gap between parent and school attempts to provide adequate services to special needs students. Variables which were being looked at in this survey included: type of community (urban, suburban and rural), age and/or grade level of students, types of handicapping

conditions, types of special education settings and agreement between the schools and parents in regards to the category and/or placement of the students. The questionnaire was also designed to ascertain who parents saw as possible advocates and to learn how parents perceived their previous experiences with school personnel.

A second major factor in choosing school districts was to locate school systems which had established advocacy channels which went beyond the guidelines established under PL 94-142. Hypothetically, parents of exceptional children should have been provided with exemplary opportunities to actively particapte in planning and implementing their child's educational needs. The intent of the survey was to see if parents perceived of and took advantage of the multifacited personnel and services available to them through their local school districts.

In each instance, the participating school district administrators were actively involved in the survey. The theoretical and actual participation on the part of each school district, included in his survey, in parent involvement and advocacy was well documented. Commitment to parent participation led the school district administrators to actively seek out parent responses. Each district was interested in receiving the results of the survey in order to constructively adapt the findings to future plans for parent advocacy. On the other hand, five school districts

declined the initial requests to participate in the project. The common denominator in each of these districts was an uneasy projection of the possible outcomes. In declining to participate, the contact administrators indicated that the possible problems which might result from soliciting parent attitudes outweighed the potential value of the survey. They were especially concerned that parents unaware of potential advocacy options would begin to demand a more active, and therefore, a hostile, time consuming role in the special education process.

RESULTS OF PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE:

Working through the director of pupil personnel officer, sixteen hundred surveys were distributed to four school districts in two eastern states. Special educators distributed the questionnaires to their students. The surveys were returned to the special educator and collected by the district officer.

A total of 217 questionnaires were completed and returned to the schools. Although this response was significantly less than was projected by the participating school districts, the written comments and quality of each response was better than anticipated. The rate of return in-and-of-itself aroused the interest of the participating districts in regards to the effectiveness of their attempts to reach out and involve parents in their children's educational programming. An overview of the makeup of the

respondents and their communities are listed in Table I. The collective particulars relating to each respondent's special needs child is listed in Table II.

Figure A gives a visual depiction of the types and percentages of each handicapping conditions represented in the survey. The majority of handicapping categories identified by PL 94-142 and the area of the gifted are represented in the sample returns. Behavior disorders represented thirty-four percent (34%) of the returns and learning disabilities represented twenty-four percent (24%) of the returns. The types of special services being provided to the students is represented in Figure B. A broad spectrum of the service delivery model as represented in Deno's Cascade Model are included in the survey returns.

The limiting factors to a more complete representation of alternative services was due to the fact that the questionnaires were distributed through local education agencies (LEA), thereby, limiting non-school district sampling. The figures represented here show the overall breakdown of the survey information. A complete visual display by community (i.e. rural, suburban and urban) is available through the first author. Parents of resource room students represented forty-two percent (42%) of the respondents. Closely behind, representing thirty-eight percent (38%) of the respondents were parents of self-contained classroom students.

When asked if they felt their child's special needs were being met, seventy-four percent (74%) of the parents responded yes. Seven percent responded that they were not sure if their child's needs were being met (see Figure C). The remainder, nineteen percent (19%) of the parents, felt their needs were not being met. This is an item where community seemed to make somewhat of a difference. Rural parents were more confident, eighty-four percent of them (84%), than either surburban, seventy percent (70%) or urban, sixty-four percent (64%) parents, that their children were being appropriately serviced by the school districts. Table III shows the specific breakdowns of this item by community. The major reasons parents gave for their feelings are listed in Table IV. The primary positive factors were concerned teachers and observable improvement in student performance. The negative factors were an inability to read on grade level and poor management of student behavior.

An unexpected variable was agreement between parents and school districts on the "category" which describes the student's handicapping condition. Parents were asked to check the one category which represented their child's handicapping condition. The school opinion was based on the actual label given to the student on his/her individual education plan (IEP). Figure D gives a str'king visual representation of the results. In forty-four percent (44%) of the cases, parents and schools did not match. This

despite the fact that in all districts surveyed, parents must sign the final document drawn up by the multidisciplinary team. This mismatch (see Table V) was consistent across all three communities: urban forty-two percent (42%), suburban forty-six percent (46%) and rural forty-three percent (43%). Table VI breaks down this mismatch by type of service the student receives. An analysis of variance indicates that the major disagreement occured when students were placed in private schools, receiving regular classroom services or receiving resource room services. Thus, placement not the type of community seemed to have caused this mismatch.

In regards to interactions with their child's school (see Table VII), eighty-seven percent (87%) of the parents were not presently involved in their local school. When asked if they would join a special education parent group, slightly less than half (49%) said they would join such a group. Fourteen percent (14%) replied it would all depend upon what they could get out of the group and what types of handicapping conditions were being encompassed in the group's activities.

When asked who in their past experience with the school provided them with the most assistance and/or advocacy, the largest response was no one provided any assistance (32%). As Table VIII shows, direct hands on teachers were perceived as providers of more assistance than auxilary (social

workers, school psychologists, etc.) or administrators (principals). A key point worth noting is that parents seemed to respond in traditional terms. That is, the child's teacher is the likely person they would turn to for assistance or information.

This 'traditional' perception of the roles of various school personnel may have been a major factor which contributed to who parents saw as possible advocates (Figure E). The responses suggest that auxilary service personnel and administrators are not directly involved in the day to day learning of the student; therefore, only the teacher(s) who sees the child the most is an advocacy resource. Interestingly enough, the respondents did not choose other parents as a major advocacy resource. This seemed especially unusual since all the districts surveyed had parent advocates and publicly informed the parents that this resource was available to them.

Parents were asked what types of linkages they would like to see established to improve communication between the school and home. Table IX is a synopsis of the parental preferences. Regular communication via letters from the school was preferred in sixty-nine percent (69%) of the cases. According to forty percent (40%) of the parents, home visits were the least preferred method for establishing home-school linkages. On the other hand, fifty-one percent (51%) of the parents were amenable to school conference. The

last variable is somewhat suspect. Teacher experience would strongly indicated that fifty-one percent of the parents of special needs students do not attend school conferences. Unfortunately, ninety-seven percent (97%) of the parents were unable to or unwilling to suggest alternative ways to establish home-school communication links.

Finally, parents were asked to identify in which of their child's program evaluations and decisions they would like to become active participants. Almost half of the participants (see Table X) were interested in becoming involved in all the program areas identified on the questionnaire. Their major area of interest was involvement in progress reviews. Sixty percent (60%) of the parents were interested in being actively involved in their child's annual review. Closely behind progress reviews was placement decisions, fifty-four percent (54%) and curriculum planning, forty-eight percent (48%) of the parents. Direct involvement in the instructional methods and materials used to meet the child's academic and/or social needs was of interest to forty percent (40%) of the parents. Less than ten percent (10%) of the parents suggested alternative areas in which they would like to have direct involvement.

IMPLICATIONS

The issue seems not to be the provision of services. Rather, the issue is the quality and depth of services provided. While parent advocates and parent groups exist in

all the communities surveyed, an insignificant percentage of the respondents availed themselves to these options.

Commonality among parents is not always neat and predictable. Parents, as in the case of all humans, choose from a multiplicity of options for meeting their needs. Almost the only area of total agreement was in the provision of humanistic services to allow their children to grow-up to be self-supporting. Parents desire the same aspirations for their special needs children as they do for all their children. Mainly, to grow-up and attain as many of their goals and aspirations as possible.

Laws and theoretical ideas may be in place, but actions and commitments transcend rules. Parent advocacy requires that each community design and actively carry-out a network of services for parents. An equal partnership and sharing of ideas, information and goals at the local level is the foundation for effective advocacy.

Based on the findings of this survey, two general statements can be made about the relationship between parents of special needs students and school districts which service the students. First of all, parents appear to be happy with the services their children are receiving. They may not agree with the school's classification of their child, but they are content with the delivery of services. Secondly, the individuals whom these parents perceive as advocates seem to be a multiplicity of people. This

multiplicity crosses states, service models, and handicapping conditions. It appears to be a question of personal preference rather than group characteristics which dictates parent needs and attitudes regarding advocacy. Therefore, generalizations concerning types of communities (i.e., rural, suburban and urban) seems unfounded as a result of this survey.

Instead, the questionnaire findings has led to the asking of some pertinent and perhaps troubling questions. To realistically plan future goals for parent advocacy and involvement, school districts must take a careful yet hard look at the following questions:

1) How do parents within communities perceive the roles of educators and how do the educators themselves perceive their roles? How do parent and/or teachers' expectations for their own children and/or students affect these perceived roles?
2) What does a school see as its responsibilities and what are the actual realities that impinge or facilitate these identified responsibilities?
3) As educators and/or as parents, do we see our schools in adversary or supportive roles and depending on how we respond, what other agencies might fulfill these roles?
4) Should there be a linkage between schools and other agencies or groups? If so, do these agencies or

groups then become part of the system or loose some of their effectiveness as advocates?

5) Is it the responsibility of school districts to educate or provide information to parents and other educators regarding the roles of advocacy?

6) And finally, at what point is the school reaching beyond its capabilities, not just to provide support services, but to get parents to utilize these services efficiently and effectively?

These questions were not designed to condemn schools or parents. There is no suggestion that advocacy be dissolved or that parents fend for themselves. Rather, the findings suggest that there are no neat conclusions to advocacy concerns. Perhaps truely committed school systems have gone too far. Perhaps we must surrender part of the responsibility and assistance to agencies and/or organizations beyond the control of the school district. Perhaps, the role of the school is to realize we cannot do it all alone.

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TABLE I
OVERVIEW OF RESPONDENTS AND COMMUNITIES

ITEM	#	%	ITEM	#	%
Location			Community		
New York	115	53	Suburban	103	48
West Virginia	102	47	City	69	32
			Rural	45	19
Sex of Respondents			Average Size of Community		
Females	154	71	less than 10,000	98	45
Males	46	21	over 1,000,000	38	18
Both	16	7	10,000 to 25,000	31	14
Age of Responndents			Race of Respondents		
31 - 40	104	48	White	163	75
21 - 30	42	19	Black	25	12
41 - 50	40	18	Hispanic	22	10
51 - 60	17	8	Oriental	4	2
Unknown	14	7	Unknown	3	1
More Than one Child in Family			More Than One Special Needs Student in Family		
	183	84		53	24

TABLE II
DESCRIPTION OF SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

ITEM	#	%	ITEM	#	%
Sex of Students			Average Age of Students		
Male	153	71	Mean Age	10-6	
Female	62	29	Range	4 to 24-6	
Type of Special Service			Handicapping Condition		
Resource	91	42	Behavior Disorders	73	34
Self-contained	81	37	Learning Disabled	52	24
Auxilary Service	16	7	Educable Retarded	35	15
Regular Class	13	6	Speech/Language	24	11
Special School	9	4	Gifted	17	8
Private Tutor	4	2	Trainable Retarded	8	4
Private Boarding	3	1	Other	8	4
Average Grade Placement			Average Age Problem Identified		
Mean Grade	6.7		Mean Age	5-5	
Range	preschool to 12th				

TABLE III
ARE PARENTS' SPECIAL NEEDS BEING MET?

COMMUNITY	YES		NO		NOT SURE	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Overall	156	74	39	19	14	7
Urban	29	64	6	13	10	22
Suburban	73	73	25	25	2	2
Rural	54	84	8	13	2	3

TABLE IV
MAJOR POSITIVE AND/OR NEGATIVE REASONS
PARENTS FEEL THEIR CHILD'S SPECIAL SERVICE
NEEDS ARE OR ARE NOT BEING MET

Reason	Urban	Suburban	Rural
Positive	%	%	%
See improvement in child's performance	31	41	31
Teacher concern and skills	8	10	29
Negative			
No response given	26	40	26
Child not reading on grade level	--	31	--
Not enough control of child's behavior	--	15	11
Child could be doing better	--	--	9

TABLE V
AGREEMENT BETWEEN SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND PARENTS
REGARDING THE CATEGORICAL LABEL DESCRIBING THE
SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS' PROBLEM: BY COMMUNITY

COMMUNITY	MATCH		MISMATCH	
	#	%	#	%
Overal	121	56	95	44
Urban	26	58	19	42
Suburban	56	54	47	46
Rural	39	57	29	43

TABLE VI
AGREEMENT BETWEEN SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND PARENTS
REGARDING THE CATEGORICAL LABEL DESCRIBING THE
SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS' PROBLEM: BY CLASS TYPE

TYPE OF PLACEMENT	MATCH		MISMATCH	
	#	%	#	%
Regular classroom	2	16	11	84
Resource room	45	49	46	51
Self-contained	53	67	27	33
Special day school	6	67	3	33
Private boarding school	0	--	2	100
Private tutoring	2	50	2	50
Other auxilary special services (eg. speech, physical therapy, counseling etc)	12	75	4	25

TABLE VII
PARENTAL INVOLVMENT WITHIN SCHOOL

ITEM	YES		NO		NO RESPONSE		MAYBE	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Are you presently a member of a parent group	8	4	207	95	2	1		
Are you actively involved in your child's school	45	21	75	35	97	44		
Would you be willing to join a special needs parent group	106	49	66	30	15	7	30	14

TABLE VIII
WHO, IN THE PAST, HAS BEEN
YOUR BEST ADVOCATE

PERSON(S)	PARENTS CHOOSING OPTIONS	
	#	%
no one	69	32
all teachers involved with my child	38	18
special educator	36	17
regular teacher	35	16
social worker	6	3
principal	5	2
school psychologist	3	1
other parents	3	1

TABLE IX
PARENTAL PREFERENCES FOR ESTABLISHING
COMMUNICATION LINKS WITH THE SCHOOL

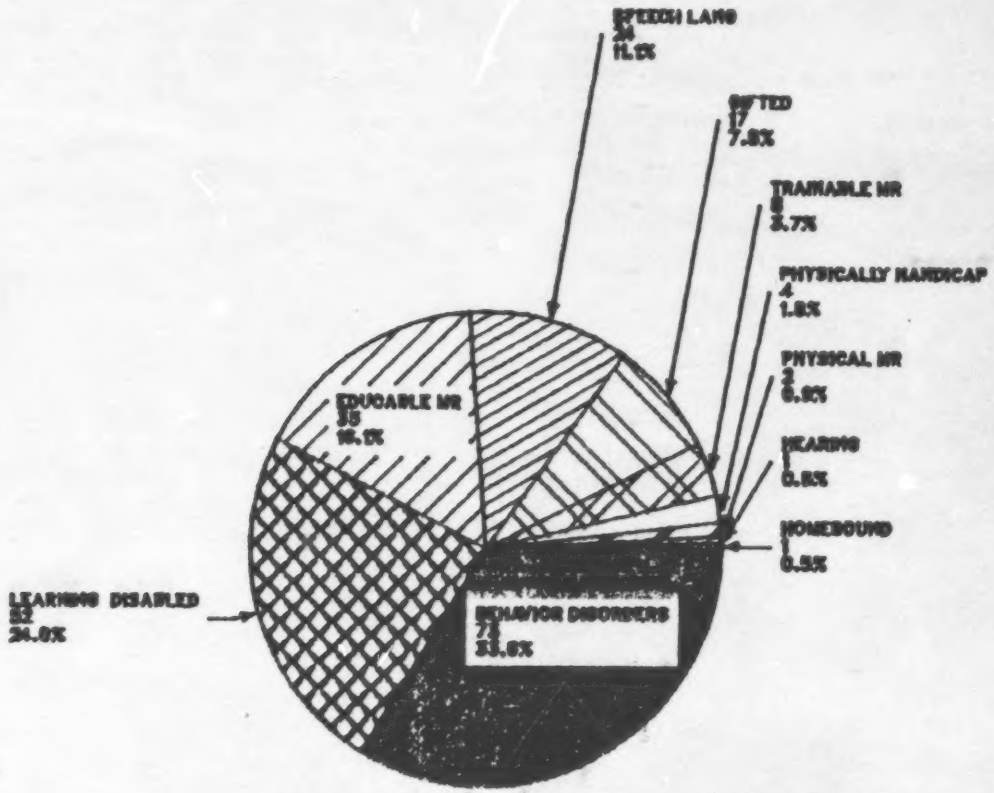
ITEM	Not at all rare		some		regularly frequently		no response	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Home Visits	87	40	57	26	40	19	33	15
School Conferences	37	17	42	19	111	51	27	12
Telephone	39	18	54	25	97	45	27	12
Letters	17	8	31	14	149	69	20	9
Other suggestions	2	0.9	2	0.9	2	0.9	211	97

TABLE X
PARENT INTEREST IN DIRECT INVOLVEMENT
IN PLANNING THEIR CHILD'S PROGRAM

ITEM	Not at all rare		some		regularly frequently		no response	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Curriculum Planning	36	17	41	19	104	48	36	16
Progresss Review	23	11	28	13	131	60	35	16
Instructional Methods & Materials	39	18	49	23	88	40	41	19
Placement Decisions	33	15	28	13	116	54	40	18
Other Areas Of Involvement	87	40	10	5	14	6	106	49

FIGURE A

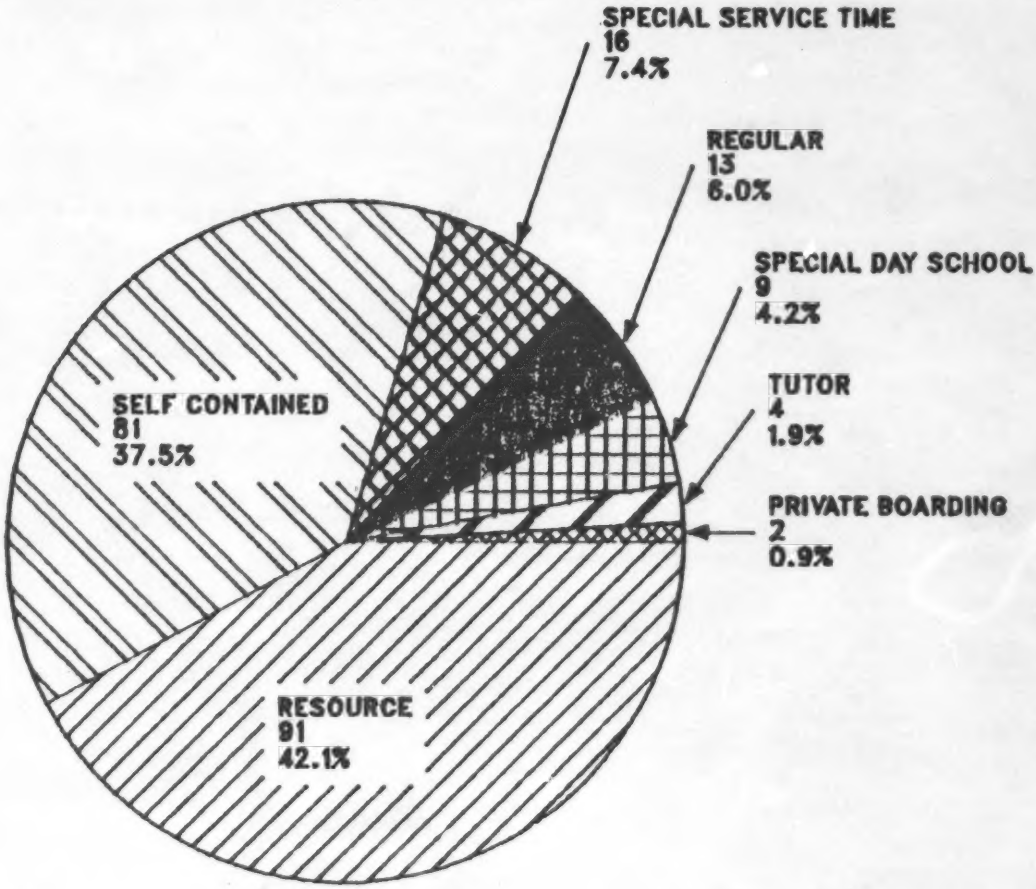
CATEGORY BREAKDOWN ACCORDING TO SCHOOLS



Sample size: 217

FIGURE B

TYPE OF SPECIAL SERVICES



Sample size: 216

FIGURE C

ARE YOUR SPECIAL NEEDS BEING MET

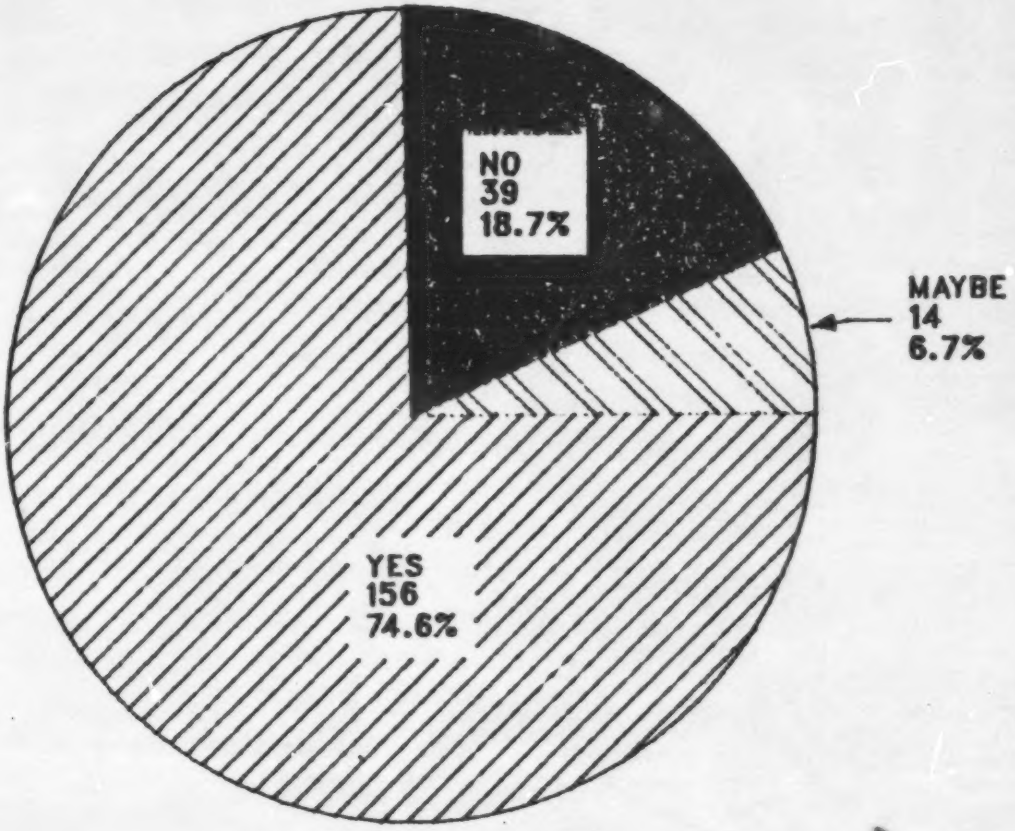


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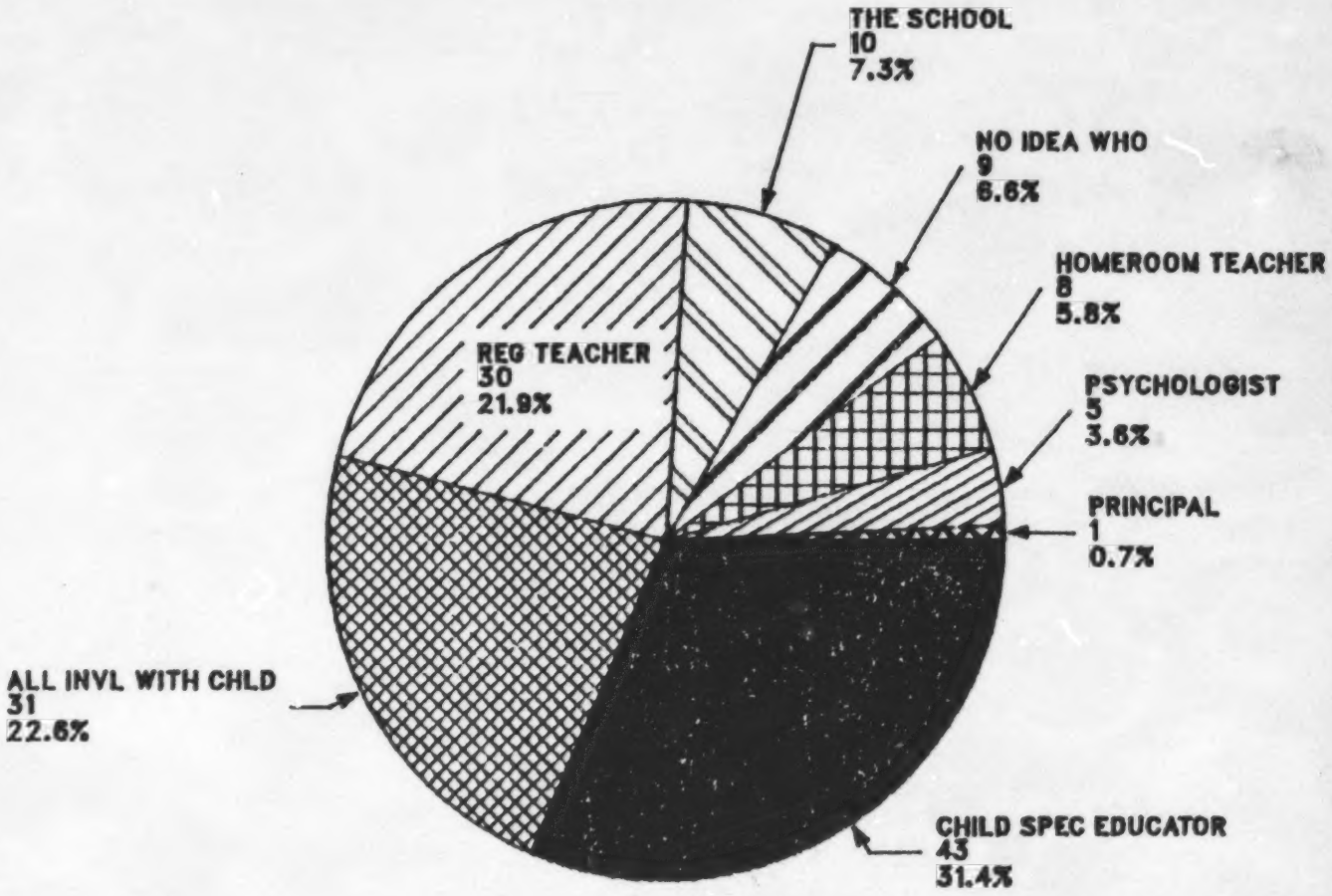
FIGURE D

AGREEMENT ON TYPE OF SPECIAL NEEDS BETWEEN PARENTS AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS

OVERALL IMPRESSIONS OF PARENTS

FIGURE E

WHO PARENT SEES AS POSSIBLE ADVOCATE



CONTROLING FOR INCIDENTAL VARIABLES